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Theodore Huff: Historian and Filmmaker

Chuck Kleinhans

Because the independent media artworld was still in the process of formation before the 1950's, we face several problems in trying to understand early avant-garde film. Today at least some formal institutions exist, however limited they may be, which carry on the financing, training, production, distribution, exhibition, preservation, and criticism of independent work. But before the 1950's, such structures cannot be taken for granted. The matrix of diverse institutions and individuals who create and sustain the specific works produced as well as artistic careers was characterized by uneven development.

Considered in terms of his various roles in an emerging film culture, Theodore Huff's life offers an instructive look into independent film and cinema studies as they were in the process of becoming institutionalized.ⁱ Huff's primary artistic contribution to early U.S. avant garde cinema consisted of work on two major films, MR. MOTORBOAT'S LAST STAND (1933), made with John Flory, which mixed realism and fantasy in making a comic satire of the Depression, and THE UNCOMFORTABLE MAN (1948), made with Kent Munson, a psychodrama of an alienated young man in New

York City. As an amateur filmmaker he worked on several films in the 1930's and 40's which are typical of independent cinema of the time, but he remains best remembered today for the Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society organized by William K. Everson in the 1950s in New York which continues to regularly screen classic film art. Professionally , Huff is remembered as a film historian whose examination of Chaplin's films, *Charlie Chaplin* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951), was the first substantial and scholarly book length director study written in the U.S. And it now appears he was instrumental in discovering and preserving the Library of Congress Paper Print collection which has given scholars an essential archive of early U.S. silent film. However, in addition to being a filmmaker and historian, Huff was also a collector, archivist, critic, silent film accompanist, film society regular, college teacher, and acquaintance and friend of numerous people involved in creating and sustaining film culture.

The basic facts of his life and career provide a useful overview for understanding Huff's place in the film culture of his era. Born December 20, 1905, Edmund Newell Huff, Jr. was the first of three sons of a physician and his wife living in Englewood, New Jersey, a suburb of New York City. The father later deserted the family, and Junior changed his name to Theodore while in college. The boy grew up only a short distance from the Fort Lee, New Jersey, movie studios which had their heyday during World War I. Fort Lee, across from upper Manhattan at the George Washington Bridge, provided outdoor locations including bluffs overlooking the Hudson River and residential settings in Englewood. Production there rapidly declined when almost all the industry followed the move west to Hollywood after World War I. As a child and adolescent Huff saw films being made in his community and

hung around the studios, catching glimpses of stars and seeing the production process.

The young man attended prep school at Phillips Exeter. Adolescent writings include a parody of the silent newsreel, "Passé News," and mock melodramas which exaggerate silent film conventions: "The Strand Theatre Presents the Super-colossal Epic 'A Little Child Shall Lead Them' or 'The Pit Falls of a Big City,' Directed by D. W. de Reel." These parodies imitate comic features published in *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture World*, and other film periodicals which Huff collected. In the 1920's he played piano accompaniment for silent films at summer theatres, a skill he also used in later activities. He went to college at all-male Princeton, graduating in 1928, a year later than his entering class. At Princeton he participated in drama club activities, as he had in prep school. A revealing news photo shows him gathered with other students outdoors during the screen test filming of some Princeton students by a Hollywood camera crew on a "talent search" promotion. His passion for cinema is clear in two English composition essays he writes at Princeton: one argues that Lillian Gish is the greatest actress of the day, and the other that D. W. Griffith is "the greatest artist of the Twentieth Century."

After graduation Huff spent several years working on Wall Street, according to a self-prepared promotional statement, but it can be surmised from some of his journals that he was unemployed or underemployed as the Great Depression proceeded. At this time he began making films and screened them at various Amateur Cinema League meetings. For a short time he was involved with the left-wing Film and Photo League, attending meetings and crewing for Ralph Steiner on documentary shoots. In

December 1935 he joined the staff of the newly created Museum of Modern Art Film Library, the first museum archive, exhibition program, and noncommercial distribution service for film as an art form in the U.S. He wrote to a friend, "My main job is arranging the musical accompaniment for the old silent pictures (I used to play in a summer theatre, have some of the old "movie" music, and was always interested in that field)." (Huff, 1936)ⁱⁱ He also seems to have put his own substantial collection of stills and other film materials at MoMA's service. Huff was dismissed, officially because of a budget constriction, in May, 1940, and began substantial work on his biography of Chaplin.ⁱⁱⁱ His next employment was with the Motion Picture and Sound Recordings Department of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., in July, 1942, where he catalogued and described films, including captured German ones. This job ended in early 1946 with the demobilization. Two letters from this time refer to Huff getting a position as "Director, Motion Picture Department, United Nations Headquarters," but that job fell through, as did a television job a few years later with the American Broadcasting Corporation, with no explanation in the available documents. He did some work in the late 1940s for the National Broadcasting Corporation reviewing silent comedies, particularly the Our Gang films for screening on the Howdy Doody Show. Huff examined them for broadcast suitability and apparently also edited out some offensive ethnic humor.

In the immediate postwar world Huff began teaching film history and introduction to film making on an adjunct basis in the Motion Picture Department at New York University beginning in fall 1946. He also taught film history at the University of Southern California in the summer 1948 and went on to the Film Institute at City College of New York in fall 1948.

During this time he also co-directed two films with his former NYU student, Kent Munson, finally found a publisher for his Chaplin book, and wrote the *Sight and Sound* "indexes" for Chaplin and Lubitsch. These were scholarly historical listings of the works of major directors (dates of production, release, cast and crew lists, etc.) and involved considerable painstaking research.

He began the 1950's with a civil service job as a film reviewer (writing catalogue copy) and then became an assistant casting director, working for the U.S. Army Signal Corps, which made training films at the old Astoria, Long Island studios. He continued to be active in film circles and writing such as meeting and gathering materials on emerging filmmaker Stanley Kubrick. The reviews of his Chaplin book were very favorable, and it was subsequently published in England and translated and published in France and Italy. Encouraged, Huff said he hoped to write the definitive history of the movies. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage at his mother's house on Long Island on March 15, 1953. The bare facts of his professional life indicate the many different situations in which Huff found himself as one of the figures in an emerging film culture. Clearly some of this is to be expected in any inchoate field: refined division of labor usually comes as growth produces a complexity that demands specialization.

In studying Huff, we see the situation of an emerging independent cinema in relation to a larger corporate capitalist industrial system, and we view in particular the situation of the individual intellectual worker within that system. The large scale mass media systems of the modern era--the corporate and industrial production and diffusion of sound/image material--need intellectual workers, skilled specialists whose labor is primarily conceptual, who work within, around, and in relation to these systems.

Today we experience these social formations and the intellectuals who fit in them in a fairly complex and articulated state: we understand and expect specialist division of labor. However in looking at Huff's career, we see someone who doesn't occupy a simple or single position, but rather someone who fits into several different positions at different times depending upon the evolution of the field. He is a "generalist," an intellectual handy-man, who can fit into many different changing and evolving sites of the system as a whole. As an intellectual worker, much of the time he is part of the army of surplus labor. He can be brought into service when the evolving system needs certain key skills or types of knowledge, but as an individual he is never strong enough to actually command a premium for his specialized abilities.

Theodore Huff represents an always present portion of the independent filmmaking world: people who don't achieve high distinction in their own work, but whose talents are essential to the success of collaborative works. In particular, his expertise in the conventions of silent film narration allowed him to provide highly accomplished camera work and editing in the films with Flory and Munson. By considering his filmmaking in sequence, we can see the achievements and changing historical moments of the independent sector.

Huff's notes indicate he wrote the burlesque western HEARTS OF THE WEST (1200 feet, 16mm) for the First Lake Follies in August 1926 which would have been during his college years. There is no further information on this summer entertainment, but he indicates he re-wrote it in April 1929 and includes the information that he bought a second hand projector at that time. Production began during summer 1929 with a cast of

amateur child actors, dragged on into the fall with weekend shooting and was revived in the spring. The first finished version was duplicated the next summer, but technical problems and additional shooting of titles and restaging sequences delayed screening for the Amateur Cinema League until March 1931. According to his production diary, Huff continued to make changes including restaging, reshooting, and tightening sequences until January 1933: for example, "Aug. 9 [1931] changes in horses (after seeing BIRTH OF A NATION)."

The juvenile movie announces its parody from the opening titles:

Ideal-Supreme Pictures presents D. W. DeReel's Hearts of the West. A D. W. DeReel Production with Rex Montague and Gloria Gishford. Copyright 1915 by Ideal-Supreme Pictures, Inc. Issac Ginsberg, President.

This is a simple story of simple people. Down through the ages, since the beginning of Time, there has beaten in the hearts of all Mankind the Eternal yearning for Love....

The children impersonating adult stars are well directed and maintain the illusion without mugging and breaking role. A barroom scene opens the film with a series of simple sight gags such as blowing the foam off a beer onto someone else. When the villain paws a dance hall girl, the sheriff kicks him out of the saloon and he and the girl fall in love. The bad guy then kidnaps the dancer and takes her to his cabin. Duane, the sheriff, looks for Nell, the barroom entertainer, unsuccessfully until an Indian tells the whereabouts of the distressed damsel. Cross cutting between the villain menacing the girl and the rescuer on his way heightens suspense. A medium shot of Duane

riding to the rescue uses a moving cyclorama backdrop repeating the same scenery flowing behind the hero. A final fight on a cliff (the same Palisades used in Fort Lee productions 15 years earlier) ends with the villain falling off and dying. The happy ending shows the couple living in a mansion. Huff wrote an original score for the accompaniment.

His production diary begins July 6, 1929: "went about trying to borrow money, to bank, etc. (had only \$65)" This must have been a time of unemployment since he notes he "left Laidlaw's" on June 20, and after working a few days a week on preproduction such as scouting locations, building a set, arranging for horses, scouting talent and so forth in July, he begins almost daily production in August once his camera, lights and other equipment arrive (he found he could charge the purchase). The production diary reveals all the typical problems of putting on a dramatic film with child amateur actors in the summer. Kids don't show up or are away on vacation, they get restless in the heat, a shoot is rained out, he rents horses which run away during the shoot, the boys fight with each other, doubles must be found for no-shows, etc. In mid-September he goes job hunting at Chemical Bank and Chase Bank. Hired at Chase (he loses the job a year later), he then works on weekends to finish the project. "Sun. Oct. 20--To Dean Street (double for Heffron) Plenty of trouble. A tough gang watched us--names, stole stuff--actors refused to ignore them. Police chased, but returned...." Some of his principal talent gets tired of the project and doesn't want to participate in retakes and finally in December while shooting in the cold weather, he decides to start again in the spring. He begins again in April, working only on Sundays, and has to pay some of the boys \$5 to get

additional shots. At one point he is arrested for snooping about a location he is scouting.

(figure 33)

HEARTS OF THE WEST is an extremely ambitious first film. A costume drama, it involved preparing a barroom and a log cabin set and managing a large cast of about 30 children for the crowd scenes. Nell was played by a ten year old boy, following the convention of Huff's male prep school and Princeton theatre days. While his previous experience in theater prepared Huff for organizing the production and his work as an accompanist a sensitivity to editing, he was apparently self-taught as a cinematographer. Given the complications and his inexperience, it is a great credit to his talent and perseverance that the film made the 1931 Ten Best list for the Amateur Cinema League's magazine, *Movie Makers*. The award also marks the importance of an organization such as the ACL in its time. For an aspiring young man such as Huff, the ACL's recognition must have been very important. His production scrapbook includes letters from ACL officials praising the effort.

Huff's production diary lists some additional projects at this time. He developed a scenario for "The Prince and the Pauper," in summer 1931, but the project ended without further explanation after an attempt to shoot test footage in and around a church which was not allowed. That fall he wrote "Little Miss Caesar" for a Methodist Church youth club, but apparently could not get any lasting interest from the mostly girl group. In December and January of 1931-32 he made a film commissioned for \$100: RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION (900 feet, 16mm; no longer available). This film, depicting

the activities of the progressive social work organization and its staff, was shown at a retirement banquet for the director. Several letters praising it from people in the foundation or knowledgeable about film indicate it was well done, as does the honorable mention *Movie Makers* gave it in their year-end 10 Best listing.^{iv} In December 1932 Huff began work on a "Riverside Church film," and shot several scenes which were shown in January, but a meeting in February notes he "resigned" with no explanation. WHAT A COOK was written in 1932 by Huff but photographed and directed by L. Wellender and shown at a party in April.

Huff's most substantial film from this period continued in the juvenile burlesque vein. LITTLE GEEZER (1932,500 ft., 16mm, not projectable at present) was a more modest effort in length, all boy cast, and sets. Originally written for a Methodist church club, Huff revised it and shot on weekends from February to May, then quickly cut it. It was mentioned in *Movie Makers* and received an honorable mention in the year's end list. Huff entered it, along with HEARTS OF THE WEST, in an amateur contest run by *The American Cinematographer*, the prestige professional publication, where it placed in the top ten. A letter from the editors about the judging remarked:

The acting of the players in LITTLE GEEZER seemed surer and more understanding. In entertainment value, the two pictures were closely matched--in fact, both of them were tremendously entertaining to the judges, all of whom had made many professional films of both of the types burlesqued--but the better tempo of LITTLE GEEZER, and its more succinct narration, gave it an appreciable edge...

While the ACL's *Movie Makers* gave his early efforts recognition, this praise from Hollywood professionals must have been the high point of this phase of Huff's creative work. The correspondance indicates that he actively sought any and all comments he could get, obviously hungry for feedback. The tone here was different. The ACL magazine and letters often have a air of genteel clubiness as befits an organization promoting 16mm filmmaking, which was in numbers and economics largely an upper middle class recreation. Their 10 best lists always prominantly include what seem like vacation trips to exotic locales. The general tone set regarding Huff is one of encouraging the earnest young man, while the Hollywood judges are much more perceptive about technique and details. Amateur contests of all kinds are often ridiculed in U.S. society because the inevitably revealed gap between ambition and accomplishment in a competitive individualist culture is easy to mock, particularly in a country with a large professional mass entertainment economy which invites aspiration while rewarding excellence in conventionality. For Huff, winning the contest and making the Ten Best list was national recognition, something not attainable in other ways. Thus, these amateur institutions provided validation that went beyond hobbyist amusement. Most disappointing, though, must have been the letter from Hollywood that explained his films were being returned:

...we were holding LITTLE GEEZER to show it to Hal Roach, producer of the "Our Gang" comedies. We felt he would be greatly interested in seeing these pictures because of the youngsters you use in them and the way in which they conducted themselves, especially the little fellow who played the part of the Big Shot. However Roach has been so very busy that

we could not get an appointment with him as soon as we expected.

Many young filmmakers hope that a film will prove to be an achievement useful to enter Hollywood. John Flory recalled at a memorial meeting for Huff, "'The one thing I can do best,' he used to tell me, 'is to direct kids. I'd like to make films like the "Our Gang" comedies'."

Mr. Motorboat's Last Stand, 1933

In June, 1933, Huff met with John Flory, a 24 year old Yale graduate and they began work on a satiric comedy of the Depression. Flory was interested in putting his available resources into a short film that he could use as a "calling card" to try to break into Hollywood. The credits for the film have always given Flory as writer and director with Huff listed as "assistant in photography" and in the titles Priscilla Peck is also credited as an assistant. Flory's experience in filmmaking at this point is not clear; the evidence indicates it was his first effort, while Huff had four years of experience and won awards the previous year. Huff's production diary supports the listed division of labor, but he was probably key in translating the script into shots and sequences, and he must have been essential to the editing which tells the story with no intertitles. They spent about five days a week shooting in July and early August, did some additional shooting in September and cut MR. MOTORBOAT'S LAST STAND in six days in October.

Subtitled "A Comedy of the Depression," the two reel film begins with the hero, Mr. Motorboat played by Leonard "Motorboat" Stirrup (a

professional tapdancer) waking up at dawn in an auto junkyard. In a montage sequence marked by very effective closeups, he tunes a radio, begins calisthenics, puts on his clothes with a series of sight gags on the theme of attempted dignity in the face of economic adversity. For example, he adds spats to his shoes but a huge hole in the sole of his shoe is evident. (figure 34) He shaves using a piece of tough rope for a brush, a knife for a razor, and an auto's rear view mirror for a shaving glass. He then produces a frying pan and egg, makes breakfast, and feeds his pet rabbit. He places cigarette butts in a silver case, puts on a straw boater (with a hole in the top), adds a flower to his lapel, plus an umbrella and a briefcase and strides off, finding in a trash container a copy of the *New York Times* to carry. The scene is much in the mode of Chaplin with the attempt to maintain civilization under hardship, though the whole is carried by the effective shots and cutting, unlike Chaplin's typically static camera and long shots. The actor thus is not asked to perform the role with the subtlety of Chaplin's whole body mime, but instead is a plastic element within the fairly fast paced montage. An African American, Mr. Motorboat is seen as comic but without the Coon or Sambo stereotyping such a figure might fall into. The junkyard sequence is very effective and may well have been the model for a similar opening in the Elia Kazan/Irving Lerner/Molly Day Thatcher satiric short, **PIE IN THE SKY**, a few years later.

Ready for the world, a junkyard vehicle beckons to our hero--literally in that through the magic of editing the door opens and closes to attract him. He appears to himself as a chauffeur, and enters the car to be driven by his double. Then follows a clever sequence in which the car seems to be moving, and cutaways of the passing scene and spectators give the impression of

travelling. Next Mr. Motorboat arrives to set up his apple stand and proceeds to open it and prepare for business with the same tidy attention to detail we saw earlier: washing each fruit, trimming and polishing. His rival, a white roughneck, sets up a stand nearby and the two sneer at each other when a passing woman stops for an apple. Mr. Motorboat tips his hat with smiling courtesy while the rival puts up a sign “unemployid war veterin” to attract the passerby. However the roughneck’s crude behavior such as polishing the apple on his clothes turns off the woman who sees that Mr. Motorboat offers, according to a newly produced sign, “sanitary apples,” proudly displayed by the proprietor who has magically acquired a spiffy white uniform.

Losing the sale, the rival goes off in disgust while Mr. Motorboat suddenly appears in Wall Street with his tiny capital. He “fishes” with his change maker and reels in (the line is stock ticker tape) stock certificates. This montage is edited together with shots of balloons with the dates 1928, 1929, etc. being inflated, as well as tires and bubbles in a bubblepipe growing larger, and shots of the rival climbing a steep hill with a barrel and then taking aim at Mr. Motorboat’s stand. Conceptually funny, this intellectual montage which seems indebted to the Soviet silent film editing style, comes to a climax when the barrel speeds downhill to knock apart the apple stand, as the balloons burst, and apples go flying, finally raining from the sky on the unwary.

His stand a mess, Mr. Motorboat seems about to resign, when he spots his rival who now has the coin changer, and a chase ensues. Well done, the two run about with Mr. Motorboat assaulting his opponent with a small popgun. The result are several “x” marks which appear on the other’s body.

(figure 35) Finally the rival escapes in a car and Mr. Motorboat contemplates suicide (closeups with double exposures of a poison bottle, a hangman's noose, water). (figure 36) But then he is shown back at his old stand in front of a group of white workers who throw dollar bills at him while he performs the old magic trick of pulling his rabbit from a top hat.

Mr. Motorboat is shown as clever, resourceful, and quickwitted. The film is surprisingly free of racial stereotypes while also avoiding the sentimentalism often found in Chaplin. Its strength is in its wit, efficiency, and clever pacing. Showing the down-and-out as self-reliant was a progressive message during the Depression. As a project it worked for Flory who quickly obtained a seven year contract with Paramount. (He subsequently left after a few years and a change in management, tried to develop a script without luck and returned to the East. He worked in a film processing lab and eventually became the Eastman Kodak representative to the nontheatrical film market, a position which made him well known to the entire independent filmmaking sector.) The film brought Huff little success or recognition, however, although it made the ACL's ten best of the year list, and was praised several times in *Movie Maker*. Huff finished one more film along with someone named Borgotta: GHOST TOWN: THE STORY OF FORT LEE (1935) a short undistinguished documentary shot in the abandoned Fort Lee studios, recalling their glory days through intertitles.

Huff made no films for the next 12 years. After he began teaching he co-directed two projects with his former student Kent Munson. THE UNCOMFORTABLE MAN is a psychodrama of an alienated young man and similar in conception, style, and mood to the work of Willard Maas and Curtis Harrington around this time. Cocteau, especially BLOOD OF A POET, and

Maya Deren suggest themselves as inspirations. (figure 37) Its general direction is well captured in a program note description written by Huff.

This subjective documentary is a psychological study of a young man who lives in the chaos and confusion of a great city. The dividing line between reality and his dream identifications is very thin. Perplexed and frustrated, he retires to his underground room and ignores the world about him until the hero's schizophrenic personality splits. But eventually the forces of the city draw him into the Crowd where he loses himself.

Documentary shots of New York City are intercut with shots of a young man in his room. Dream distortions appear in the interior sections with shots such as an image projected on a face. These evocations of memory and nightmare are contrasted with everyday shots of Washington Square oratory, a Salvation Army band, kids at play, sidewalk vendors, rousting people out on the Bowery. The vision of personal alienation in the city is much like Dostoevsky's underground man. Shots of movies on 42nd Street at night are cut with distorting mirrors, while repeated and strongly canted shots in an Eisensteinian mode appear. (figure 38) The available materials suggest that the work was written by Munson as a longer dramatic piece and that only the first half of the script was actually shot. Then the piece seems to have been drastically edited to fit the images actually available rather than the original longer conception. It also seems from the assorted materials of this time that Munson provided the alienated young man theme (and played the lead) while Huff provided the expert re-editing.

THE STONE CHILDREN, made by Munson and Huff in Hollywood the summer Huff taught at USC, is a less successful follow-up. As Huff described it:

All sorts of tragedies and crimes go unnoticed beneath our very noses, from simple thefts to wars, but our increasingly artificial society places more importance in a fantasy-world than a world of reality, and because our minds are so drugged with the more-than-lifesize counterfeit of passion and violence (in movies, books, sports, music, etc.), we do not recognize the real things, or even worse, close our eyes to them.

"The Stone Children" is an oblique allegory of an Exile's journey through the fantastic land of celluloid shadows. From his unsavory beginning to his psychotic end, he experiences in turn: anger, fear, pride, ambition, frustration, desire, remorse, confusion and madness. Played in counterpoint to the highly artificial shams of movieland, all these real emotions go unnoticed. Even his sardonic demise has ludicrous and theatrical overtones.

The film mixes black and white and color footage, handheld and tripod shooting, and prominently uses cross cutting to demonstrate the contrasts of modern life. Again the alienated young man, played by Munson, appears cut against shots of Hollywood's presumed falsity. Yet the irony is thin and the statement seems forced because so much attention is paid to the interesting visual surface of Hollywood's glitter, and the young man's story seems overdramatized for a short narrative. Where THE UNCOMFORTABLE MAN used typical details of urban life to build its contrasts, THE STONE

CHILDREN uses Los Angeles details which are already encoded as exotic (Woodlawn cemetery, Paramount Studios, Bel Air mansions, the Chinese theatre, ocean piers, backlots, etc.), as well as celebrity moments (Louis B. Mayer, Sam Goldwyn, Chaplin, the Griffith funeral). The discrepancy between the ostensible message (this is all false and corrupt) and the obvious tourist fascination in the documentary material undermines the project. Sustained attempts to use amusement park images as metaphors of society's sham values seem pale cliches. Writing to Huff to explain why he had shown the New York film but not the Hollywood one at Art in Cinema, the postwar avant garde experimental showcase in San Francisco, Frank Stauffacher faulted Munson's acting and advised Huff that experimentalists were on shaky ground when trying to imitate what the industry could do so well.

The collaboration seems to have tried the patience and endurance of both Huff and Munson, and many notes attest to the frustrations on both sides. Munson is mentioned as active in New York City experimental film circles on into the 1950s and then disappears from the scene. Huff made no more films.

As an historian and scholar, Huff's Chaplin book, less biography than chronological discussion of the creative work, is his greatest achievement. It was definitive within its time and for years afterward. The first careful and substantial director study produced in the U.S., it helped establish serious film studies, although it must be remembered that it was done as a labor of love without institutional support during a time of unemployment after Huff left MoMA. In a letter to Chaplin sending a sample of the book, he explained the research behind his "handbook":

In the year 1940-41 I managed in New York to see 54 of your total 76 films for the purpose of this book. On other pictures that have been withdrawn I had complete notes, taken down at the time. Instead of the usual drivel, etc. written by "highbrow" writers, I have tried to stick to facts and to turn out a practical guide and discussion of your pictures, one by one. (Huff, 1942)

He was unable to get it published immediately. It was turned down by several New York publishers, and he claimed (there is no record) accepted for publication by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, but the war broke out and ended that plan. Attempts to interest Chaplin himself were rebuffed by the Chaplin Corporation, which wanted no "authorized" publication. (Unknown to Huff, Chaplin was anticipating writing his autobiography at the time.) It was not until the late 40s that Huff found a publisher, a new small house that sought serious books.

Essentially a factual and descriptive study, the Chaplin book avoids making any strong evaluative statements or generating any overt analysis. The biography is constructed with sympathy to Chaplin's side in every dispute, professional, business, or personal, drawing on the existing journalism. But most of the book is a recapitulation of the plots of the various films with observations about any changes or innovations in the Tramp persona, cast, etc.

Without academic training as an historian, Huff saw his mission as getting the facts correct. Among his papers is an unpublished, but circulated in typescript, list of "hundreds" of errors (mostly dates being off by a year, as Huff marked with apparent anger) in Lewis Jacob's pioneering and then-standard history of U.S. film. While believing that history consisted

primarily and essentially of "facts," Huff did hold that the cinema should have a canon based on aesthetic quality, a matter he apparently thought was self-evident. In an undated document, probably from the mid-1930's, he constructs a list of about 100 "Films for a Permanent American Theatre (or Museum) of the Cinema." Today the list seems unexceptional, taking into account that it was constructed from knowledge of films actually available and thus omits entire national cinemas (e.g., Italian, Japanese), major works then lost or unknown (e.g., many Soviet silent films), and assumes the dramatic narrative mode as the norm. In the mid-40's while working at the National Archives, Huff took sharp exception to an explanation by Barbara Deming that aesthetically inferior works could be given equal preference in preservation and archiving for purposes of later historical study.^v

Among the papers are unpublished pieces in typescript, such as a complete shot-by-shot script of *BIRTH OF A NATION* including the length of each shot. Subsequently this paper was prepared as a legal-sized mimeographed document with stiff covers and copyrighted, published, and sold by MoMA in 1961.^{vi} Other notes include descriptions of two German films of the war era, *OHM KRÜGER* (1941), set in the Boer War with British villains, and *DIE GOLDENE STADT* (1942), an anti-Czech propaganda film. The papers also include what we might call applied history: lists of film music available from the Library of Congress, notes on the musical accompaniment for *BROKEN BLOSSOMS*(1919), an arrangement for piano of the symphony orchestra score for *THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE* (1921) done for a screening during the war at the Washington Workshop, a cinema society. And his papers include stray items such as the apparent "fact": "Tom Mix never on screen smoke, drank, lied or killed."

In one document from about 1950 Huff claimed, "while in Washington, due to his persistence, the Library of Congress dug up their early 1896-1912 films which they had buried in the cellar." However credit for the discovery is in dispute. Patrick Loughney's dissertation credits a library clerk, Howard Lamarr Walls, and for understanding its importance to then-Librarian Archibald MacLeish, and the discovery took place at least a year before Huff's arrival at the National Archive.^{vii} But Charles Turner's correspondance from Huff and memory of conversations with places him at the discovery.^{viii} According to this version, Huff moved to Washington in the summer of 1941 with the intention of tracking down the collection. He appealed to many librarians who were not responsive and finally recruited and trained Walls. Huff and Walls were both active in the Library's film society. Doubtless Huff's expertise helped establish the importance of the find.

Huff apparently began collecting cinema materials at an early age and continued the practice throughout his life. Several trunks of papers which he put in storage in the 1930's were lost due to flood damage, but in the mid-1940's he estimates that he had 10,000 film stills ("said to be the most comprehensive private collection"), and in 1949 he estimates 15,000. Upon his death and the donation of his papers to the George Eastman House, it was announced that 30,000 stills were received. In addition, he had a large collection of silent film music and cue sheets, and apparently he first came to the notice of film curator Iris Barry at MoMA when he offered information about music for INTOLERANCE and she responded by inviting him to screenings of early films.

As most collectors are, he was in touch with other collectors although he does not seem to have been involved in extensive trading or buying and

selling for a profit. When he worked for MoMA he allowed them to duplicate many of his stills. MoMA then sold prints, apparently at some profit. As the uncredited and unpaid source for many stills in the MoMA collection, Huff was angry at what he saw as an exploitation of his original good will and carefully assembled personal resources. But Huff never had the business sense or merchandising acumen to actually make money for himself off the limited but definite market for his collection, which must have been the most substantial part of his estate. (Huff never seems to have owned any real property; he lived with his mother at various times and most of his years in New York City in YMCAs and residential hotels. That he took a very humble civil service job in 1950 seems evidence that he had few financial resources.)

During most of his professional life Huff served as a critic working in a characteristic essay genre of the time: the informed program note for a film society or museum screening. These essays were about 1000 words long and fitted on two sides of a mimeographed sheet. A standard, virtually obligatory, item at non-profit film screenings from the 30's through the 70's, the film notes format provided cast and credit information as well as an expository essay which typically provided pertinent information about the production practices, a general aesthetic interpretation and evaluation of the work, and often placed the work in the director's career. In a time when serious and accurate reference books in cinema were rare, college classes in cinema virtually nonexistent, and thoughtful criticism unusual, film screening notes provided a valuable resource in an audience's self-education.

His files contain multiple versions of essays on the same classic films, slightly revised for each subsequent publication. These are evaluative essays of masterpieces, and Huff clearly explains the film's' excellence in aesthetic

terms applicable to the cinema. Everything else--the social and political significance of the work, how it relates to the society and historical moment in which it emerged, etc.-- tends to be ignored. Huff painstakingly documented *BIRTH OF A NATION*, to his mind a masterpiece, but never wrote a line about its racist content, and in the Chaplin book excused its use of blackface grotesques as a convention of the time.

Huff taught in three of the pioneer cinema studies programs in the U.S. as they were being established and growing after World War II. At NYU he taught film production and film history, at USC and CCNY he taught film history. The records he kept were sparse, but from some syllabii, exams and a typescript of notes from his USC lectures prepared by one of his students, conceptually the courses seem unremarkable: history is again a collection of important facts assembled in the manner of conventional national cinemas and historic periods with screenings of major works given the available resources of what films were in circulation to rent for screenings. A USC lecture on sound results in a long list of every consecutive technological innovation from 1857 but with no reflection on technological change in general or in relation to film aesthetics.

One USC lecture ends with the note: "DAVID WARK GRIFFITH DIED AT 8:25 A.M., JULY 23, 1948 IN HOLLYWOOD CALIFORNIA." This captures what Huff thought was most important: the exact time of an event, its importance being defined without further reflection (the death of the Greatest Artist of the Twentieth Century, as his college essay put it), and assembled into a pre-existing framework.

Without the academic credentials of advanced training and degrees, it might have been possible for Huff to secure a regular teaching position by

offering equivalent professional experience (a fairly common practice when establishing new academic disciplines and in the arts in general). Certainly his Chaplin book would have supported that. However, Huff was an awful teacher, and that was an insurmountable handicap. A long letter from department chair Robert Gessner after visiting Huff's NYU class details the miserable quality of his classroom performance. And, during an exchange of ideas about film history that took place in *Film Culture* in 1958, Hans Richter who headed the CCNY program recalled,

The late Theodore Huff was acknowledged as one of the most conscientious fact and date-finders in the realm of film history.

He was quoted during his lifetime and is quoted today as the ideal film historian. On account of this quality, I engaged him to give a course in film history. His facts and dates were as exact as they could be. His success as an instructor, though, was negative. At the end of the term, there were few students left.

(Richter, "Hans Richter on the Function of Film History Writing," *Film Culture* 4:3, (April, 1958), p. 26)

It is hard to see Huff as a lasting success at anything given his individual personality and the fact that he gives ample evidence of being fairly neurotic. In correspondance, long time friends frequently add when setting up a meeting the admonition "don't fail me this time!" or similar phases indicating he did miss engagements. One undated note from a "Bob" or "Ben" left at his late 40s-50s hotel urges: "Ted--Don't just disappear. Let's talk. The atom bomb hasn't destroyed NYC yet!" His friend David Bradley writes back from Los Angeles in 1950 that art house theatre owner Raymond Rohauer in conversation called Huff, "a weak character." In remarks for a

memorial program at George Eastman House, John Flory noted, "If Ted ever had a fault, it was his great and innate humility. Quick to appreciate ability in others, he regularly discounted his own unique talents."

Theodore Huff seems basically unable to imagine how others thought of him--unable to adequately surmise what others were thinking and feeling in a social situation, a skill necessary for good teaching and writing drama. Thus, he was unable, for example, to actually write dramatic screenplays except as parody of existing work. He is frequently insecure and underrates himself, characteristics for which his correspondants chide him. Most disagreeably, from my perspective, Huff exhibits a passive-aggressive syndrome in which he attacks people behind their back. In the early 1940s he writes to Mary Pickford and Chaplin obsequiously praising them while decrying MoMA. His anger remained active, and in January 1952 he proposes writing an article on MoMA "films stolen (by them!)", films burned and ruined, left-wing political activities, and lack of scholarship.

In today's media culture Huff might have better been able to find a niche for his talents because the system as a whole is sufficiently specialized to validate and employ someone with his skills. And the institutions within the system can teach an individual the related skills needed to hold down a job. For example: Huff teaches college level film courses, but is awful at it. Had he gotten a Ph.D. (there were none offered in film at the time), he would have been socialized into fitting into the expectations, the manners, the protocols of academe; in short, the ideology of the system. In other words, he might have been a dull and fairly inept teacher, but he would have known how the system operated, worked as an apprentice teaching assistant, spent several years sitting in classes while being an apprentice in the profession

and thus able, on some level, to critically regard the process of teaching from the daily examples offered by his mentors. And, he could have probably kept his job, or kept some kind of academic job in an expanding film scholar market. Or he could have come to the early realization that he was temperamentally unsuited for teaching and moved into a related position that did not call for teaching: working in a media library, an archive, a media art center, or some form of arts administration. However, in the still-developing media culture of the first half of the 20th century, there were few such places, and those that did exist were often tangential to the larger institutions which set the pace. The Amateur Cinema League, the film societies such as Art In Cinema and Cinema 16, and the small circulation serious film publications were started and kept going as labors of love, not as sponsored institutions. In Huff's time there was only one MoMA Film Library, and he burned his bridges when he left it. Huff did not have a place, one place, or one line of development in terms of a career, and as it turned out, he occupied several different sites at different times. Entering his mid-40's, when most professionals are well established in a career, and perhaps about to have the luxury of a mid-life crisis, Huff achieved professional distinction with the acclaim his Chaplin book received. And at the same time he experienced what must have been a personal humiliation in finding employment only as an assistant casting director, a very low level clerk position, for the Signal Corps at Astoria.

Thus, there are two ways to look at Theodore Huff's professional and personal life. From the point of view of the overall system, of society in general, which accepts an ideology and practice of bourgeois individualism, Huff was a film nerd *avant le mot*. Underdeveloped socially, he was

overinvested in film as an object of study. He knew almost everything there was to know about it, it seems, yet he was unable to capitalize on that knowledge. For the system he was, in the political economy of the labor market, a useful item. Such a person, in our time, in our culture, is held responsible for their own failure: "Get a life!"--the slogan of the Reagan-Bush era.

But from his own perspective, that same ideology of bourgeois individualism turned Huff into a self-validating person with regard to the system. He became a priest of the cinema. A low priest, to be sure, but a person devoted to service without regard for personal gain. Each humiliation validated his vocation. He was concerned with the ordering and arranging of cinema, with its proper interpretation and fixing its "facts" in the proper place. He was obsequious to the authorities he recognized, carefully learned the roles and rituals which needed to be carried out, attended to the proper procedures, and devoted himself to preserving the icon-photos of his saints. He preserved texts of all sorts like holy relics. He lived what seems, to external view, a celibate life in extremely modest one room circumstances. Huff never travelled except for his one summer pilgrimage to Hollywood, bonded only with men and didn't seem to socialize with married couples or single women, or any relatives except his widowed mother, and was in his own way blessed by being in this environment.

While there is no specific information, there are hints in his collected papers that Huff lived as a very closeted gay man. For example, as he turned forty, we find that a letter from his mother tells him to look for a "wife" (in quotes in original) and settle down. It is tempting to "out" Huff in order to compare him with his contemporary Parker Tyler, a flamboyant

dandy in the 30s, and well-known homosexual writer and film critic (long overdue for recognition as a major gay intellectual figure). Both men published books on Chaplin at about the same time, but where Huff's is methodical and prosaic, Tyler's is witty, intellectually adventurous, and operates by Tyler's trademark leaps of imagination and avant garde style. In contrast, Huff was part of a different movement, a different style. He was entranced by old films, especially by silent film, but he was unable to develop a larger analysis of them except to appreciate their technique (of which he has a great practical mastery). After the war, a younger generation used a slightly derisive term for his type--a "foof"--a friend of old films. Theodore Huff probably would have accepted the label without hearing the sarcastic dismissal.^{ix}

iThis analysis is based on archival research in the Theodore Huff papers at the George Eastman House museum. My work there was limited in two significant ways. First, it turned out that the materials available were much more extensive than initially indicated, and my time was limited to three long days. The full collection of Huff materials includes his extensive collection of stills, at least 15,000, mostly from Hollywood films; I did not examine that portion of the collection. While I was able to examine every single item in his personal papers, and make photocopies of the most important ones, I did not have the opportunity to carefully correlate all the material. I am reasonably sure that my conclusions do justice to the materials. However, there are probably minor points which could be refined. The individual items in the Huff papers have not been arranged or separately indexed or catalogued. In numerous cases Huff's papers include one or more draft versions of typed correspondance, with written emendations, from him. I do not know what was actually sent and I have had no opportunity to check the papers of his correspondants, even those which are known to exist (e.g., the Flory papers are received but uncatalogued and unavailable at Ohio State University; the Stauffacher papers are available at the University Art Museum, U. of California, Berkeley). I have received summary information and comments on an earlier draft from Ron Magliozi, Assistant Supervisor, Film Study Center, MoMA, based on the correspondance from Huff to Charles L. Turner from 1942-53 and interviews with Turner in the MoMA archives. Turner also provided ten pages of comments on an earlier draft of this article.

Second, of the various films available, only MR. MOTORBOAT had been restored. I was able to watch it numerous times, but with the others I could only view the archival material once, taking notes while seeing films for the first time. THE UNCOMFORTABLE MAN in particular deserves a much closer and more detailed study than I could give at this point. The most interesting discovery was a series of letters and scripts from Gregory Markopoulos from the late 1940s which would be important for anyone researching the early career of that major independent filmmaker.

iiAll otherwise unreference quotes from the Theodore Huff papers, George Eastman House.

iiiRon Magliozi's research suggests that Huff's dismissal from MoMA followed acrimonious inter-staff wrangling between him and Soviet film expert Jay Leyda. Leyda was forced to

resign from the film department following publication of an article smearing him as a leftist propagandist by Seymour Stern, *iFilm Library Notes Build 'CP Liberators' Myth,* *New Leader* 23, March 1940. Some context and details can be found in chapter 7 of Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton, Princeton U.P. 1992). Huff blamed *icommunist influence* for his departure from MoMA, with his strongest anger for curator Iris Barry who fired him.

ivIn all of these projects another person is mentioned working on it with Huff, but the creative roles are not clear. For the Russell Sage film a "Miss Perry" is mentioned, perhaps a Foundation staff person.

vDeming wrote an article, *iThe Library of Congress Film Project: Exposition of a Method,* *L of C Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions*, 2:1 (July-Sept, 1944) 3-36. Deming and others were employed in the project of determining which of the 1400 odd films a year which were submitted for copyright should actually be archived. She and the research team worked at MoMA under a Rockefeller grant. Huff's response is in several heavily revised typescripts of his letter to the head of the Library of Congress, but it is not clear that a final copy was actually sent. Huff's vehemence and personal attack on Deming is such that it would be easy to imagine that a friend reading it in draft form would have counseled against actually sending it. Huff's letter dismisses her as a *icollege girl* (she had an M.A.), and includes a smear of Deming as a leftist sympathiser, a claim he also made about Iris Barry, head of the MoMA Film Library, after she fired him, and Siegfried Kracauer, the emigrÈ film historian. The critical results of Deming's work are contained in her book *Running Away From Myself* on 40s film, somewhat similar to Kracauer's study of German expressionism, which reads the films as symptoms of a general American social-political consciousness during the war. Films undistinguished in conventional aesthetic terms can be very important in such an analysis, a type of criticism quite different from Huff's values and practices.

viThe paper is described as *iA Shot Analysis* done by Huff *icirca 1939.* Given his long standing hatred of his former employer, Huff would have been outraged by this *iexploitation.*

viiA Descriptive Analysis of the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection and Related Copyright Materials, i (diss. George Washington University, 1988). Loughney's information is from LOC documents and phone interviews with Walls in the 1980s.

viiiHuff correspondance with Turner and other materials, Film Study Center, MoMA.

Personal correspondance with Magiolozzi and Turner, November 1993.

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